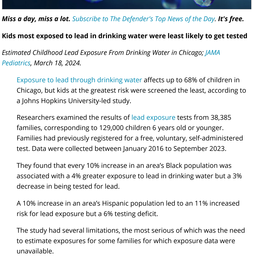
03/22/24 • NEWS

Phthalates Linked to Increase ADHD in Autistic Kids + More

The Defender's Weekly Science Digest delivers a roundup of the latest research on children's health, including studies on vaccines, drugs, chemicals, pesticides and lead exposure.

By Angelo DePalma, Ph.D.



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Kids most exposed to lead in drinking water were least likely to get tested

Estimated Childhood Lead Exposure From Drinking Water in Chicago; *JAMA Pediatrics*, *March 18, 2024.*

> Exposure to lead through drinking water affects up to 68% of children in Chicago, but kids at the greatest risk were screened the least, according to a Johns Hopkins University-led study.

Researchers examined the results of lead exposure tests from 38,385 families, corresponding to 129,000 children 6 years old or younger. Families had previously registered for a free, voluntary, self-administered test. Data were collected between January 2016 to September 2023.

They found that every 10% increase in an area's Black population was associated with a 4% greater exposure to lead in drinking water but a 3% decrease in being tested for lead.

A 10% increase in an area's Hispanic population led to an 11% increased risk for lead exposure but a 6% testing deficit.

The study had several limitations, the most serious of which was the need to estimate exposures for some families for which exposure data were unavailable.

Phthalate exposure increases risk of ADHD in autistic kids

Early childhood exposure to environmental phenols and parabens, phthalates, organophosphate pesticides, and trace elements in association with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) symptoms in the CHARGE study; *Environmental Health*, *March 14, 2024.*

A University of California at Davis-led study reported that children with autism spectrum disorder exposed to endocrine-disrupting phthalates were at greater risk for developing attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

The researchers undertook the study to shed light on why a small percentage of autistic children also develop ADHD.

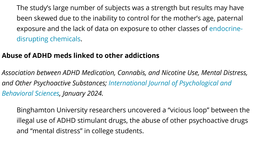
Phthalates — chemicals added to plastics to make them more durable — are found in numerous household items, packaging and foods. Endocrine disruptors are synthetic chemicals that interfere with the body's natural normal hormone-signaling, or endocrine system.

Researchers analyzed the urine of 549 children ages 2-5 previously enrolled in the Childhood Autism Risks from Genetics and the Environment (CHARGE) study for 62 chemicals and trace metals.

The only noteworthy associations were between two phthalate breakdown products, which raised the risk of the second diagnosis by 10% but only in boys.

The lack of association in girls may have been due to the relatively low number of girls in the study, the authors wrote.

A (presumably weaker) association was also found for children with "a mixture of all [studied] chemicals" in their urine.



Can ADHD medication reduce risk of accidental death?

ADHD Pharmacotherapy and Mortality in Individuals With ADHD; *JAMA Network*, *March 12, 2024.*

> Youth taking ADHD drugs had a 21% lower risk for all-cause mortality and 25% lower risk for death caused by accidents or other unnatural causes, according to an international study group.

Researchers also found a 14% lower risk for death from natural causes but, given their study design, this result was likely caused by chance.

The study involved 148,578 Swedish individuals, 59% male, ages 6-64, who had received an ADHD diagnosis between 2007 and 2018.

Despite the large age group spread, the median subject age at diagnosis was age 17.4, meaning half the subjects were older and half were younger than 17.4.

Within three months of their ADHD diagnosis, 57% of the subjects began ADHD treatment and 43% did not. None of the subjects had previously taken ADHD drugs.

The study authors cautioned against over-interpreting these results due to the "limited number of events" they observed. However, the risks they reported were comparable to dangers associated with other childhood conditions, for example, Type 2 diabetes.

Mom's exposure to chemicals raises baby's congenital heart risk

Association between maternal exposure to environmental endocrine disruptors and the risk of congenital heart diseases in offspring: a systematic review and meta-analysis; *Environmental Research Letters*, *Feb. 2, 2024.*

> Chinese investigators found strong links between a pregnant woman's exposure to three classes of endocrine-disrupting chemical contaminants and congenital heart problems

Depending on the chemical class, exposures were associated with a 32% to more than 100% greater risk.

The researchers' medical literature search led to 17 studies involving about 1.4 million mother-child subject pairs with records of the mom's prenatal exposure to four chemical exposure categories and the baby's heart health.

Studies had to meet strict criteria for data quality and freedom from bias.

The researchers found large, clinically significant increases for all exposure categories: 32% for pesticides/insecticides, 34% for polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons, 46% for alkylphenolic compounds and 109% for heavy metals.

The study's large number of subjects was a strength but results may have been skewed due to the inability to control for the mother's age, paternal exposure and the lack of data on exposure to other classes of endocrine-disrupting chemicals.

Abuse of ADHD meds linked to other addictions

Association between ADHD Medication, Cannabis, and Nicotine Use, Mental Distress, and Other Psychoactive Substances; *International Journal of Psychological and Behavioral Sciences*, *January 2024.*

> Binghamton University researchers uncovered a "vicious loop" between the illegal use of ADHD stimulant drugs, the abuse of other psychoactive drugs and "mental distress" in college students.

The researchers stopped short of proclaiming a causative relationship, but their results revealed mental distress as a common denominator for all off-prescription drug use.

Using an 80-question survey, researchers surveyed 702 undergraduate students of various ages on their use of ADHD medication, alcohol, cannabis and "other psychoactive substances." They collected demographic and academic performance data and assessed mental distress using standard psychological assessments.

Whether prescribed or not, ADHD medications were linked to increased anxiety and depression but associations for other substances seemed to depend on dosage.

For example, infrequent pot or nicotine use appeared to reduce mental stress whereas frequent use increased it. Students who smoked regularly were also more likely to use cocaine, cannabis, LSD, unprescribed pain pills, sedatives and psychedelics.

ADHD medications (e.g. Ritalin, Adderall) are commonly used among U.S. college students for recreational and academic purposes. Mental distress, an umbrella term for anxiety, depression and other mental health issues, causes physical harm by promoting brain inflammation.

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Angelo DePalma, Ph.D.
Angelo DePalma, Ph.D., is a science reporter/editor for The Defender.

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Vivienne
a month ago
Very interesting and worthwhile science digest, thank you Dr. DePalma!
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Ron Koenig
a month ago edited
Between the vaccinations and the exposure to pesticides and lead (both in and out of the womb), young lives are less able to live a normal, vibrant life.
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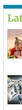
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